

Guides to Life

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“Thanksgiving is that very special holiday when we take a break from our hectic everyday lives to spend quality time with our loved ones, rediscovering all the reasons we don't actually live with them.”

That is the beginning of a classic humor piece by Dave Barry. Sadly, it also expresses a reality that we encounter too often: the challenge of getting along in a family, and particularly an extended family.

For many of us, we look ahead to the gathering at Thanksgiving very happily. We enjoy the company of our family and friends. We have a great time when the day arrives. We learn about the changes in each other's lives. We sympathize with difficulties and share in the joy of good news. We eat a full and delicious meal together. We look forward to repeating the experience next year.

For others of us, though, the holiday is not so terrific. Perhaps we have lost a family member since last year. Or one of our sons or daughters has chosen to be with the in-laws again this year, leaving an empty place in our hearts even if we arrange the table so we don't show an empty seat where a son or daughter should be. And maybe Uncle Louie gets into that argument with Cousin Harry again, as they do every year: Uncle Louie loves the Tea Party and Cousin Harry agrees with all of the Occupy protests. Each year their voices rise as they try once again to convince each other while the rest of us try to bring peace. We end the holiday exhausted and wonder whether we really have to do this again next year.

Those of us who experience the second kind of Thanksgiving may wonder: how many other families are as dysfunctional as ours?

One answer can be found in the tales of our ancestors told in the Torah. Since early November we have been reading about the families of Abraham and his descendants. We have encountered example after example of family dysfunction. If Torah is any guide, and surely it is, we are by no means alone when we experience our family as dysfunctional.

Not only that. We are supposed to revere our biblical heroes, the patriarchs and

matriarchs of Judaism. But so very often they turn out to be morally flawed or even outright immoral.

Abraham tells his wife, Sarah, that Pharaoh will kill him unless she pretends to be his sister instead of his wife. Pharaoh then takes Sarah into his palace and Abraham grows rich while she is there. Not only that; he does the exact same thing again with Abimelech. This is no way for a husband to behave.

Sarah also acts in a way that is at best questionable. She wants Abraham to have a son and so offers Hagar to him. In the mores of that time, I suppose that's OK. But Sarah then treats Hagar cruelly. Moreover, when Sarah has her own son, she sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert, putting their very lives at risk.

Isaac is no better than his parents. After marrying Rebekah, Isaac tells Abimelech the same lie as Abraham's: "She's not my wife, she's my sister." This time, Abimelech found out the truth before taking Rebekah into his tent. But that doesn't make it right what Isaac did.

And Jacob? We all know about the deception by Jacob, stealing his brother's blessing by fooling his old, blind father. With Rebekah's help, I might add.

What's going on here? I thought these folks were our heroes.

Perhaps we should think of them in a kinder way because we are judging them by the standards of today, not the standards of their time.

That's not a bad explanation, particularly when we consider that the Torah had not yet been given and the Talmud had not been compiled. Our ancient ancestors did not have the benefit of the great guides to life that the Torah and Talmud provide to us.

When Jacob deceived Isaac, they had never heard, "Honor your father and mother," because God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments many generations later.

When Sarah acted cruelly toward her slave, Hagar, and then sent her and her son out into the desert, they had never heard the prohibition in Deuteronomy that you shall not oppress a slave.

When Abraham and then Isaac offered their wives up out of fear for their own lives, they could not yet know the ruling by Maimonides centuries later, based on Talmud, that "A man should honor his wife more than his own body and love her like his own body."

We have the advantage over our ancestors. We do have the handbooks, the guides

to proper living, set forth in Torah and Talmud and all the many interpretations and rulings that have been accepted subsequently. So we do have the means to make moral decisions and, at a minimum, avoid the kind of cruelty and deception that we find so disappointing in the actions of the patriarchs and matriarchs.

Coming back to our Thanksgiving celebrations, the larger question when we reflect on this annual gathering is this: how can we live our lives in both a moral and satisfying way, even if our families may sometimes disappoint us? One good way to answer that question is to learn what has worked in the lives of others. What has helped them to live a good life? The answer lies in their life stories. We can ask people who have already lived pretty full lives to tell us about the choices they've made and how those turned out for them.

A columnist for The New York Times has done just that. His name is David Brooks. He has written two columns recently on exactly our topic. He calls them "The Life Reports."

In late October he wrote a column that began this way:

If you are over 70, I'd like to ask for a gift. I'd like you to write a brief report on your life so far, an evaluation of what you did well, of what you did not so well and what you learned along the way.

He went on to say that he wanted to hear from his readers for two reasons.

First, he said, we have few formal moments of self-appraisal in our culture. Occasionally, on a big birthday, people will take a step back and try to form a complete picture of their lives, but we have no regular rite of passage prompting them to do so.

More important, he went on, these essays will be useful to the young. Young people are educated in many ways, but they are given relatively little help in understanding how a life develops, how careers and families evolve, what are the common mistakes and the common blessings of modern adulthood. These essays will help them benefit from the life experience described in these reports.

These essays also have a third value, in my opinion. This value is one of special relevance to us. By reading the essays, and considering how other people remember and summarize their lives, we can learn lessons in living that may help us with future choices and show us how to make sense of the times already gone by. In this third way the essays reinforce what we learned earlier this morning about Rachel and her advocacy for Israel in the trial before God. She had many difficulties in her life. But when she summarizes her experience, her focus is on the times when she acted with kindness and compassion. She learned to make the most of her life and to see past events in a broader context.

There is not enough time this morning for me to convey fully the amazing and enlightening essays that people submitted to David Brooks. I strongly recommend you find his blog [just Google David Brooks blog] and read the essays he has posted there. He posts one each day. They are inspiring. They also help us to see that we are by no means alone in the struggle to make sense of life.

On Tuesday of this week Brooks published a column entitled “Life Reports Number Two.” In that column he summarized some of the numerous essays he received. I want to tell you about four life lessons he extracted from these revealing stories.

I know you can’t write these down. I don’t expect you to remember all of them. I hope that some of them will resonate with you.

Also, I will post my sermon on the Temple’s website and send it by email to the congregation. Please do look for it if you are curious to consider whether any of these answers may help you.

First of all, in reflecting on our lives and wondering how we did, Brooks advises that we divide our life into chapters. The unhappiest of his correspondents saw time as an unbroken flow, with themselves as corks bobbing on top of it. A man named Neil lamented that he had been “an Eeyore not a Tigger; a pessimist, not an optimist; an aimless grasshopper, not a purposeful ant; a dreamer, not a doer; a nomad, not a settler; a voyager, not an adventurer; a spectator, not an actor, player or participant.” Neil concluded: “Neil never amounted to anything.”

The happier ones divided time into phases. They wrote things like, “There were six crucial decisions in my life.” Then they organized their recollections of their lives around those pivot points. By seeing time as something divisible into chunks, they could more easily stop and self-appraise. They felt they had more control over their fate.

The second lesson is this: recognize that you can’t control other people. David Leshan made an observation that was echoed by many who wrote to Brooks. Mr. Leshan said, “It took me twenty years of my fifty-year marriage to discover how unwise it was to attempt to remake my wife. . . . I learned also that neither could I remake my friends or students.”

At the same time, and to the same point, some of the most inspiring stories were told by stepparents who came into families after there already were children from a previous marriage. They very wisely bided their time. They accepted slights and insults in the beginning. Gradually, they were accepted and even loved by their new children, if they had the sense not to jump in too quickly with advice and discipline.

Number three: measure people, and yourself, by growth rate, not by absolute talents. The best essays were by people who made steady progress each decade.

Regina Titus grew up shy and sheltered on Long Island. She took demeaning clerical jobs, working with people who treated her poorly. Her first husband died after six months of marriage and her second committed suicide.

But she just kept growing. At 56, studying nights and weekends, she obtained a college degree, cum laude, from Marymount Manhattan College. She moved to Wilmington, Delaware, works as a docent, studies opera, hikes, volunteers and does a thousand other things. She acknowledges, “I did not have the joy of holding my baby in my arms. I did not have a long and happy marriage.” But hers is a story of relentless self-expansion.

The last, and to my mind the most significant, lesson, is this: lean toward risk. It’s trite, but apparently true. Many more seniors regret the risks they didn’t take than regret the ones they did.

I need to emphasize that lesson. In my view it’s one of the most important. Many more people regret the risks they didn’t take than regret the risks they did take. Taking risks left far fewer people unhappy than playing it safe and thus missing out on opportunities for change.

I realize that many of us are in a stage of life where it is less likely we will make changes than might have been true when we were in our 20’s or 30’s. But I feel very strongly it is never too late in life to make changes. I say again: It is never too late in life to make changes. We all have many more choices about our lives than we usually allow ourselves even to contemplate, much less act upon. If you think your life might be better by making a change – then go ahead and make the change. Sure, you might regret it. But you are more likely to regret not having changed when you look back on your choices later in your life.

Anyone fully satisfied now with the way life is going doesn’t need to make any changes. But for anyone who feels maybe there’s a better way to be, whether in relation to our spouse or partner, our parents, our siblings, our children or grandchildren, our friends, our job – in any of these areas, the most important lesson from the lives in the David Brooks essays is this: we have but one life; to live it well requires that we examine where we have been, look around us at where we are now, look forward to where we want to be, and then make choices that make it more likely we will achieve our goals.

And for us, as Jews, in addition to the guidance of the essays in the life reports published by David Brooks, we have the added advantage of the moral and practical wisdom of our Jewish tradition to help us find our way to the life we want to live.

I hope we will each find our own best way to live a fulfilling life.

Let us say, Amen.